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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 000288

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SUBJECT: Milinkevich Strong in Grodno

Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) Summary: Poloff recently visited the western city of Grodno, hometown of opposition presidential candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich. Despite increasing harassment and pressure from authorities, Milinkevich's regional campaign leaders believe that Milinkevich would readily win an honest election in the region. However, they explained that the local government's ideological departments are orchestrating the electoral falsification that will hand the victory to Lukashenko. Milinkevich's team also explained how Lukashenko's campaign is violating several laws. Poloff also met with the local campaign head for Aleksandr Kozulin, another presidential candidate. While Kozulin's team faces the same pressures as does Milinkevich's, Kozulin does not have a strong organization backing him in this region. While in Grodno, Poloff asked several people if they listened to the new broadcasts of Radio Raciya. Most said no, while one person claimed she tried to tune in the station but was unable. End summary.

12. (U) On March 13, Poloff and the British DCM traveled to Grodno, hometown of opposition presidential candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich and one of the two largest cities in western Belarus. Poloff met with the campaign teams of Milinkevich and Aleksandr Kozulin, the other opposition presidential candidate. Poloff had requested meetings with Lukashenko's campaign team and with the Oblast Election Council. Although both initially agreed to meet, just before the visit they both cancelled on the pretext that Poloff and the British DCM had not yet received their election accreditation from the GOB. However, Poloff did confirm that Lukashenko's campaign headquarters is based in the city executive committee building (city hall). Poloff also visited the site of a Jewish cemetery where the GOB is expanding a sports stadium (septel).

Milinkevich Strong in his Hometown

13. (C) Poloff met with Anatoly Khatsko, head of Milinkevich's campaign for Grodno Oblast, and Sergey Antusevich, head of his campaign for Grodno city. Both were in good spirits and explained that, despite serious efforts by the authorities to impede their work, their campaign was successful in Grodno. Milinkevich had high name recognition, aided by the fact that he had been deputy mayor in the 1990s and by the quantity of negative reporting about him in state media. They thought that Milinkevich would easily win an honest election in Grodno, and estimated he had 70% percent support. His support rose to 90% among educated citizens. Both based this estimate on their door-to-door campaigning; they said they were surprised at the number of people who said immediately they

planned to vote for Milinkevich. They claimed Kozulin would only win a small portion of the vote, and that Kozulin's fiery television appearance had turned voters away from him.

14. (C) Khatsko complained that campaigning was hampered by the authorities' decision to allow candidates or their proxies to meet with voters only in three locations, none of which sat more than 200 people. When Milinkevich visited Grodno on March 4, they said more than 2,000 turned out to hear him. Antusevich showed a number of photos of the event and of the regime's efforts to disrupt this meeting. Police came to their headquarters the morning of the event to tell them it was an illegal gathering; Khatsko said he spent the previous evening driving around town to prevent police from preemptively arresting him. He explained that the deputy dean of Grodno State University organized and led a counter demonstration with youth from the pro-Lukashenko state-run NGO Belarusian Republican Youth Movement (BRSM, or Lukamol). BRSM students came to the rally with loudspeakers and drums and tried to disrupt Milinkevich's speech.

Ideological Departments Prepare Falsification

15. (C) Both Khatsko and Antusevich explained that they expect the regime to falsify the vote. In fact, they said that a number of Milinkevich sympathizers, including the wife of one of their campaign workers, have been drafted to serve on local election commissions and are passing them information about the regime's plans. Antusevich added that election commission officials had to take an oath of

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loyalty to the regime before being appointed. [Note: they gave the example of one local polling station, located in a small college. Eleven of the sixteen local election commission members are staff at that college. The authorities apparently figured it would be easier to control a group that all worked together. However, several of these people are professors who tacitly support Milinkevich.] Falsification will not come from the election commissions, but is being organized by the ideological departments of local governments. Antusevich claimed these departments have already prepared the voting protocols determining how many votes each candidate will receive. Milinkevich's team still plans to observe all polling stations in Grodno on election day, and 20 to 30 of them during early voting.

16. (C) However, the Milinkevich team believes the populace is more aware now of how the regime will falsify the vote than in previous elections, and is resisting. Antusevich said there is now less pressure to vote early than in 2004, and many people are frustrated with the regime. They know how they and their friends plan to vote, and know it is a lie when state media claims Lukashenko has 80% support. Milinkevich's team in Grodno stated they are not planning to send people to Minsk on election night to protest, arguing that authorities will block trains and road traffic. They claimed any change through street demonstrations will depend on the residents of Minsk. The thousand or so people they could send from Grodno would not be enough to make a difference in Minsk.

Repression Growing

17. (C) Milinkevich's campaign team is facing increasing repression as the election approaches. Both Khatsko and Antusevich said they no longer answer their doors to prevent police issuing them a summons. Authorities recently arrested Antusevich's assistant as he left for

work. He was quickly sentenced to five days in jail for allegedly urinating in public (Antusevich said his wife testified in court, to no avail, that this was absurd as her husband "went to the bathroom before he left home").

¶18. (C) In many cases police detain Milinkevich activists for short periods to limit their contact with the public or seize their campaign materials. According to Antusevich, the week before factory guards at the Azot plant (Grodno's largest employer) detained two Milinkevich activists for 30 minutes when they were trying to pass out material outside the factory's gate. The guards apologized and let them go, but only after shift change was over. Khatsko and Antusevich were arrested at a rally outside Grodno, driven by police into the border zone to the town of Ashmany, where they were fined BYR 250,000 [USD 116] each for being in the border zone without permission. Even though police had brought them there. Both also explained that just before Poloff's arrival an independent journalist had tried to interview the visiting head of the CIS observer mission. Instead, security forces detained him and gave him a choice, either they could take him to jail or they could drive him four kilometers outside of town and drop him off. The journalist chose being dumped outside town.

¶19. (C) To illustrate the depth of the problem, Antusevich handed Poloff a list of 23 incidents Milinkevich activists had with authorities in Schuchin (population 8,000) between February 17 and March 12. Milinkevich activists in that town have been summoned to speak to police and prosecutors a number of times, several have been detained and others have had their houses and cars searched.

¶10. (C) In many cases, Khatsko and Antusevich maintained that police and court officials treat activists with sympathy and tell them they plan to vote for Milinkevich. However, these authorities are afraid to lose their jobs and so must carry out the repressive acts. Antusevich argued that many state officials are fed up with Lukashenko, but continue to support him out of fear.

Legal Arguments

¶11. (C) Antusevich described legal research he had conducted showing Lukashenko was illegally running for president. Although the 2004 referendum removed all mention of term limits from Article 81 of the Constitution,

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Article 8 of the Law on the President still limits the president to two five-year terms. Antusevich also showed Article 70 of the Electoral Code, which insists the incumbent president must take a leave of absence from his duties during the election campaign. Lukashenko, seeking his third term, has not done so.

Kozulin's Team, Not as Organized

¶12. (C) Poloff and British DCM also met with Valentin Oskirko, head of Kozulin's campaign in Grodno. Oskirko painted a picture that showed Kozulin did not have the organization or resources in Grodno that Milinkevich does. He lamented that a number of people the campaign employed to collect nomination signatures were "provocateurs," who actually submitted faked signatures of dead people. Oskirko explained that Kozulin had held three rallies in Grodno in two days, and had also addressed crowds in Smorgon and Lida. At one rally in Grodno over 600 people came to hear him speak. At another rally, Oskirko said no one came, so Kozulin walked to a nearby market where he held an impromptu rally for about 300 people.

¶13. (C) Oskirko complained that authorities are hindering Kozulin's efforts to get his message out. At rallies in Grodno and Lida, and again in Masty where Kozulin's deputy spoke, groups of BRSM youth under the direction of plainclothes police tried to disrupt the meetings. In Grodno, a city of 300,000 people, Oskirko said the GOB only authorized 23 places for placing campaign posters. [Note: In contrast, Lukashenko's "For Belarus" posters were in every store window.] After Oskirko complained to the election commission, they were authorized to also place materials inside 127 polling stations until just before voting starts. However, Oskirko pointed out that few voters enter polling stations before an election. He also claimed that police and cleaning crews tear down opposition campaign posters. Police have also seized Kozulin leaflets in Lida and Grodno.

¶14. (C) Oskirko and another Kozulin activist in the office said they could not guess how much support Kozulin has in the region. One person estimated, based on his efforts going door-to-door for Kozulin, that 17% support Lukashenko and 16% support Kozulin, while 50% are firmly against Kozulin. Oskirko claimed that Kozulin's television appearances had led people to compare Kozulin to Milinkevich, with Lukashenko out of the conversation.

¶15. (C) Oskirko mentioned that his campaign workers have been asked by several people, mainly pensioners, "Is it true that if we vote for Lukashenko the BNF [an opposition party] will burn down our houses?"

Who Hears Radio Racija?

¶16. (C) Poloff asked those he met if they had listened to Radio Racija, which recently started broadcasting from Poland and Lithuania. Five people in Milinkevich and Kozulin's offices said they did not know anyone who had even tried, while one student said she had tried to tune it in, but could not find the station.

Comment

¶17. (C) These meetings highlighted the sharp contrast between the capabilities of the Milinkevich and Kozulin teams. Granted, Grodno is Milinkevich's home turf, but his campaign team appeared to be far better organized and more active than Kozulin's. This difference likely holds true across Belarus, if for no other reason than that Milinkevich was nominated by a coalition of political parties and NGOs, while Kozulin came from nowhere, took over a faction of a political party, and started his campaign without an established team. Milinkevich would probably win an open election in Grodno, but Lukashenko is not going to allow any open or honest election.

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